

A View into Japanese Animation through Watanabe and Ikuhara

An Honors Thesis (HONR 499)

By

Jules Patalita

Thesis Advisor

Dr. Vanessa Ament-Gjenvick

Signed

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Abstract

For the last few decades, Japanese Animation has grown to one of the largest global providers of televised animation. As time passes, the influence it has over Western media has only increased; yet, there is little academic writing on the subject as a whole. By analyzing the themes and aesthetics used by two of the top directors currently working on televised series in Japan, Watanabe Shinichiro and Ikuhara Kunihiro, we can see how their works have been influenced by our own culture, and how their work has or will impact our own entertainment in the future.

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Since the early 20th century, the United States has ruled over the global production and distribution of animation. With Disney's *Steamboat Willie* (1928) spearheading the assault, the American studios of the time quickly and almost ruthlessly conquered the globe, leaving the world in a daze over these cartoons. One of the countries most enamored by this new entertainment was Japan. A country with a history of puppetry, animation seemed to the artists of the times like the next step in their ancient art form. With the founding of the Kitayama Film Studio that there was finally a studio solely for the purpose of creating animation in Japan. As time went on, many other studios had difficulty keeping costs low enough to compete against Disney, but Kitayama was able to turn the animation into a mass production process, allowing for lower costs and more output (Yokota, Pg. 26).

Of course, once WWII began, this media war was put on hold. After the conflict, Japan became an interesting place culturally. There were remnants left of the ultra-Nationalist views that dominated before and during the war; but the presence of Americans in the country and current Japanese politics could not help but put its touch on the society. With the mixing of Eastern and Western, much of the culture of Japan was changed radically, but chief among them was the animation industry, which rapidly expanded in the next decades, quickly capturing a large amount of the local market. It was with the creation of major animation studios with the singular goal of trying to match Disney that anime as we know it began. The first real break for the industry was in 1963, when *Astro Boy*, the first anime television series premiered (Yamaguchi). Toei Doga, the studio behind the work, found its success due in great part to one man on their staff, Tezuka Osamu.

Tezuka, the director of *Astro Boy*, was the man who most shaped anime into what it is today. Not satisfied with the simple plot and animation of the American animation of the time, he had four goals for his own work: to create television series with longer episode lengths, allowing for more depth in character and plot; to limit the number of lines used, making the process of animation faster and cheaper, and to sell merchandise to further finance the work (Yokota, Pg. 27). These are a few of the core elements that all televised anime operates off of today, and it allowed Toei Doga to spread their work further than any Japanese studio before it. Finally, in the late 70s and early 80s, the animation of the Japanese, now forever known as anime, began making a significant global impact.

The past years have shown an increasing number of mainstream American media being influenced by anime. One of the more recent examples was Guillermo del Toro's *Pacific Rim* (2013). While the director said himself that he did not look to any specific examples of the genre for his film, most fans and critics saw the numerous similarities between the film and older anime (Sandy). Just finishing the finale of its spinoff series, *Avatar the Last Airbender* (2005-2008) was one of the Nickelodeon channel's biggest hits this last decade; the show is currently at the center of an argument as to whether the show should be considered anime or just a Western cartoon.

With the steady popularity of the media, as well as its increasing influence in our own entertainment, anime seems to be a part of the Japanese culture that demands study. Surprisingly, there seems to be lack of academic study into the area of anime, with exception of Studio Ghibli, the only Japanese Studio to win the Oscar for Best Animated Picture; while there is work in the area, it is significantly less researched than most other media in America. This

could be for multiple reasons, whether it be lack of a springboard to begin such research, or the difficulty in beginning study on a fandom that spans multiple decades and thousands of different series and films. I believe that main reason, however, lies in people's impression of anime. Whereas most other media forms have a deep pool of inspiration and hidden messages to draw from, the average American looks at Japanese Animation, and American Animation for the most part, as either being created solely for children, or adult comedy (but never another genre). "Adult Swim programming – including telecasts of Family Guy, American Dad...accounted for 37 of the top 50 telecasts on basic cable for the week among adults 18-34, more than any other network" (Kondolojy). Looking at the market, the only animation for adults in America that has done well has almost exclusively been comedy; this comedy has also usually been satire, and used foul-language and humor to further point out that it is, in fact, not made for children. While this exact stereotype does not exist in Japan to nearly as strong of an extent, they have their own negative connotations to the fans of anime.

Since the 80s, anime has had a stigma against it as being entertainment reserved for nerds, or "otakus." The term "otaku" was coined by Akio Nakamori in a 1983 editorial for a magazine, which he used as an umbrella term to describe those of the fandom. An excerpt from it reads, "How can I put this? They're like those kids — every class has one — who never got enough exercise, who spent recess holed up in the classroom... That's them" (Nakamori). The real problem, as we see from the article, is that the appearance of many fans simply look and behave like nerds, which only makes picking out the "otakus" easier. While anime did have a boost of popularity in the mid-to-late 90s, it has since become media for a niche audience once more. The industry, however, has come to realize this and has used it almost as its signature

trademark. One can see a noticeable difference in the types and tones of anime released in the last 20 years over anime that was produced beforehand. This status as outsiders allows them to create self-referencing work without fear of being misunderstood or unappreciated. Today, most anime producers know that the main population had little to no regard for their product, so they ignore them in the creation of the media. Instead, series focus on selling to the small, niche audience that they know will be willing to, almost obsessively, view and purchase their product.

Now, by having this medium be so inclusive, it has more difficult for someone not accustomed to analyze it, just due to the strain of having to recognize and adapt to the norms of anime. One could do an extensive study on just the tropes of today's anime alone. The landscape of mainstream Japanese animation is similar to American mainstream television: both showcase a strict desire for profit, usually turning to sexual appeal or dark, edgy violence to attract viewership. Still, in the case of anime, just as it is with all other cultural artifacts, there are the outliers that distance themselves from their peers, both in quality and in content. There are directors that can still be named auteurs without having to redefine the word. Two of these men are Watanabe Shinichio and Ikuhara Kunihiro; they may arguably be the most talented anime directors in Japan, and they are both barely 50.

Watanabe Shinichiro-The Tarantino of Japanese Animation

Watanabe began his career in animation in the late 1980s. His early career had him working for Sunrise, a prestigious studio best known for creating the *Gundam* series, the best known, and most successful, mecha anime of the last few decades. Due to this, most of his earliest work revolves around space as a setting, with much of that involving robots. The biggest credits from that time to his name was being assistant director and doing storyboard and for *Macross Plus Movie Edition* (1995), storyboard for *Mobile Suit Gundam Wing* (1995-1996), and episode directing for *Visions of Escaflowne* (1996) ("Watanabe, Shinichiro"); these three are high-profile works and known for their quality. Watanabe, is most recognized for his heavy inspiration from Western media. His signature anime, *Cowboy Bebop* (1998), has more elements and motifs from American than it does from Japan. One of his most recent anime, *Space Dandy* (2014), was actually released simultaneously in Japan and America, with Americans getting to see the show first due to time zone differences.

A factor that sets him apart from many of his peers is that Watanabe's work and style is predominately Western, in that it both takes most of its inspiration from Western media, but also is staged and written in a way that is more Western in thought. As a broad categorization, Western people (meaning those from the Americas, and Europe in this case) are more left-brain based in their thinking. Science and concrete reason make up much of the backbone of society's mindset; if religion exists, it is usually monotheistic and a system where there is only one correct answer. "The West is driven by advancing the civilization. This is accomplished largely through science and technology and increasing our abilities to utilize the world in order to gain greater comfort and satisfaction for individuals" (Sheedy). Watanabe's characters are

also usually loners brought together by circumstance, further embracing a more Western mindset. Most of Watanabe's writing comes across as Western. It is this style, along with his repeated references and homages to Western media, that creates the backbone of all his work.

Cowboy Bebop was Watanabe's directorial debut, and is widely considered his greatest success. The story revolves around Spike Spiegel, a "cowboy," a bounty hunter of the future. He, along with his crew of an ex-cop, a con-woman with amnesia, and a young hacker, fly throughout the galaxy hunting down criminals with empty wallets and their rundown spaceship, the Bebop. Throughout the series, the backstory of Spike is slowly revealed, showing that he is an ex-member of a crime syndicate; he tries to quit after he falls in love with Julia, the girlfriend of his partner Vicious. Spike is lead to believe Vicious kills her, which sparks a suicidal rampage against the syndicate, only to survive. This is the point where the series begins. The final episodes show Vicious overthrowing the organization to become its leader. Spike tries to intervene, learns that Julia is alive, and watches as she dies as they attempt to escape. The final sequence shows Spike once again leading a death charge to kill Vicious, which finally succeeds at the cost of his own life.



Though it is his first anime, it best represents Watanabe's style as a director and an artist; most of the elements throughout find themselves in every other series he directed in some form. For *Bebop*, the first is the most simple to notice: music. In particular, almost all of *Bebop*'s music is American in origin. Starting just with the title, bebop was newer form of jazz created to counter the older, swing style of dance jazz. This form of out-going, counter-hegemonic music is made into a parallel with the crew, and their own society-breaking mindset. This is best seen in the text of the opening sequence, which reads:

"Once upon a time, in New York City in 1941... at this club open to all comers to play, night after night, at a club named 'Minton's Play House' in Harlem, they play jazz sessions competing with each other. Young jazz men with a new sense are gathering. At last they created a new genre itself. They are sick and tired of the conventional fixed style jazz. They're eager to play jazz more freely as they wish then... in 2071 in the universe... The bounty hunters, who are gathering in the spaceship 'BEBOP', will play freely without fear of risky things. They must create new dreams and films by breaking

traditional styles. The work, which becomes a new genre itself, will be called... COWBOY BEBOP."

Every episode title (instead of being called "episode 1, episode 2," etc.) is called a "session," and the title of each session is either the name of a song, or a musical reference; the first three sessions are "Asteroid Blues," "Stray Dog Strut," and "Honky Tonk Woman." Past basic naming, the plot of many episodes revolves around music, or musicians. In one episode, a young boy playing the harmonica is the answer to a murder. In another, a saxophone player is an old comrade of Vicious', and a key figure in a drug deal. Even our main heroine is named after the song "My Funny Valentine." It is not just jazz and Blues, however, that is referenced throughout the show; we also see episode titles referring to heavy metal, and Rock & Roll bands such as Queen, the Beatles, and the Rolling Stones.

Another major motif of the show, and perhaps the main reason behind its success in the West, is the abundance of American influence throughout. Not even including the American music, one would think that the series was directed by an American. First, the overall style of the story and imagery can be classified as noir, one of the genres created by American directors (Mast, Pg. 333). This universe, while colorful, is not a safe one; there are crooked cops, dangerous women, and possible betrayal everywhere one looks. Stories of love, revenge, betrayal; these are all common-place in any pulp fiction detective story, but were rare in the Space Operas that dominated anime at the time. There are also countless film references in the episodes. The first episode's central location is a tavern mimicking the bar from Robert Rodriguez's film *Desperado* (1995). A bounty in another episode is modeled after Woody Allen. In another, we see references to *Tom & Jerry* (1940-1957), *Django* (1966), *Butch Cassidy and*

the Sundance Kid (1969), *Pierrot Le Fou* (1965), the Batman franchise, and plenty more. In all of these examples, there is little more than a passing reference, or even an episode or character named in honor of the material; but even this shows an amount of appreciation for these Western classics. Best of all, however, one episode appears to be entirely composed as an *Alien* (1979) reference. Going past the passive references of the others, this is an active effort to follow and copy elements from the film into the episode. A mysterious, fast moving creature is aboard the ship attacking the crew, so Spike chases after it using a motion tracking device and a flamethrower. It even copies the jump scare with the cat, but uses the crew's dog. With this, it is obvious to see the level of thought he put into the original source before attempting to recreate it. Throughout the series, one of the constants is Watanabe's love of American culture and media.

Still, Watanabe lets it be known that he has not forgotten his roots; first and foremost, he is a Japanese man influenced by Eastern culture. This is best shown by the subgenres of the series, the first of which is the Yakuza story. The crime syndicate in the series functions not as the mafia does in *The Godfather* trilogy, but as the Yakuza, Japanese gangsters, and the Triad, the Chinese crime organizations. The second Asian-inspired genre is that of the Chinese Kung-Fu film. Spike's character is modelled in fight scenes to resemble Bruce Lee, with many homages to Lee's past films and fights. In the second episode, the climatic fight takes place against a man who looks too similar to Lee's opponent from *Game of Death* (1978) for it to be coincidence.

The best indicator of this, however, comes from the 22nd episode, "Cowboy Funk." In it, Spike, a "space cowboy", is pitted against Andy, a true cowboy complete with horse and six-

shooters. It is perhaps one of the biggest homages to Western culture; it showcases Watanabe's love of the spaghetti Western (a genre of Western that were shot mainly in Italy for cutting the budget) by using the greatest international symbol of America, the cowboy, which he is already incorporated into his universe through the bounty hunters. At the end of the episode, Andy admits that Spike is the superior cowboy, riding off into the sunset. But he then returns, riding his horse as a noble samurai. It is symbolic of the samurai film genre; samurai films (especially the work of director Kurosawa Akira, director of the classic *The Seven Samurai*) were inspired heavily by classic Westerns, only to have Westerns be inspired by samurai films decades later (*The Magnificent Seven* as a direct adaption of the classic samurai epic) (Mast, Pg. 452). Both in the series and in real life, the two survive and grow stronger off of one another. In this episode, we see Watanabe most clearly show what culture has heavily impacted his work, while also stating that, at heart, he will return to his own ethnic roots in his art. It also shows the cyclical nature of how the West affected him, and then how his work with affect our own.

To further prove that Watanabe never lost touch with his roots, his next directorial credit, *Samurai Champloo* (2004), takes place in Japan. *Champloo* is the story of Fuu, a young girl looking for her father, a "samurai who smells of sunflowers." Accompanying her are Mugen, a brash, wild fighter, and Jin, a calm, calculating Ronin, who owe her their lives. The series follows them as they travel the country in search of this mysterious man, while observing the coming change throughout Japan.

First, it is important to show how this series distances itself from *Bebop*. The most obvious one is that the Japanese influence is much more obvious, as the show is taking place in Japan. The Edo period took place from 1603-1868, and was defined by peace and seclusion.

For these 200 years, Japan kept its borders closed to everyone and Christianity, a new, terrifying Western religion, was banned. The social hierarchy was also absolute, with there being no way for one to move up in class and rank ("Tokugawa Period: Japanese History"). It was the time in Japan's history where they were solely Japanese, with no foreign input as a whole. It seems almost ironic that Watanabe then decides to put his hip-hop world inside this time period.

Even with these differences in mind, when fans called *Champloo* a "spiritual successor" to *Bebop* ("Spiritual Successor: Anime and Manga"), they were not just referring to both series having Watanabe as the director. Both have similar structures: 25 episodes that are mostly one-shot adventures with the characters, with about a fourth of the total episodes relating to the overarching plot. This is the style that seems to fit Watanabe the best throughout his career, as it lets him focus on world building without being limited to the scope of the immediate plot.

More importantly than that, however, is one of *Bebop's* themes that headlines in this series, the mixing of different genres and styles together. The title, while seemingly nonsensical, speaks to this important factor of the anime. "The 'champloo' in Samurai Champloo is something of a play on words. It stems from 'Chanpur,' a word in the Okinawan dialect that means to mix up or hash" (Dent). Clearly, the main genre used here is samurai films, a genre touched upon but never fully utilized in *Bebop*. We then have the hyperactive, colorful style of hip-hop music as an added layer on top of this. Amid samurais and grass huts, we see baseball, traveling rap artists, gambling huts, and more. It seems ironic that Watanabe sets this highly Western story inside Japan's most isolated era. This just shows the director's inner

process, that his work (which is anime, and therefore highly and solely Japanese) is so in tune with Western thoughts and ideals. The show definitely shows just as much American appreciation as the former work, but in different ways. *Bebop* feels western in its references to American films, as well as its visual styles and the genres it copied. With *Chinploo*, we see fewer references, and more of the elements of Western culture; we have characters defying the rules and the government, trying to reach happiness their own way. Perhaps this is deeper than previously imagined, and this combination is purposely jarring for effect. It gives the viewer a taste of what the Japanese probably thought as the West first began entering their country again; to them, the culture shock may have been just as severe a difference as samurai films to hip-hop. It is because of this combining of genres and styles that Watanabe has been called the Quentin Tarantino of anime (Eckes).

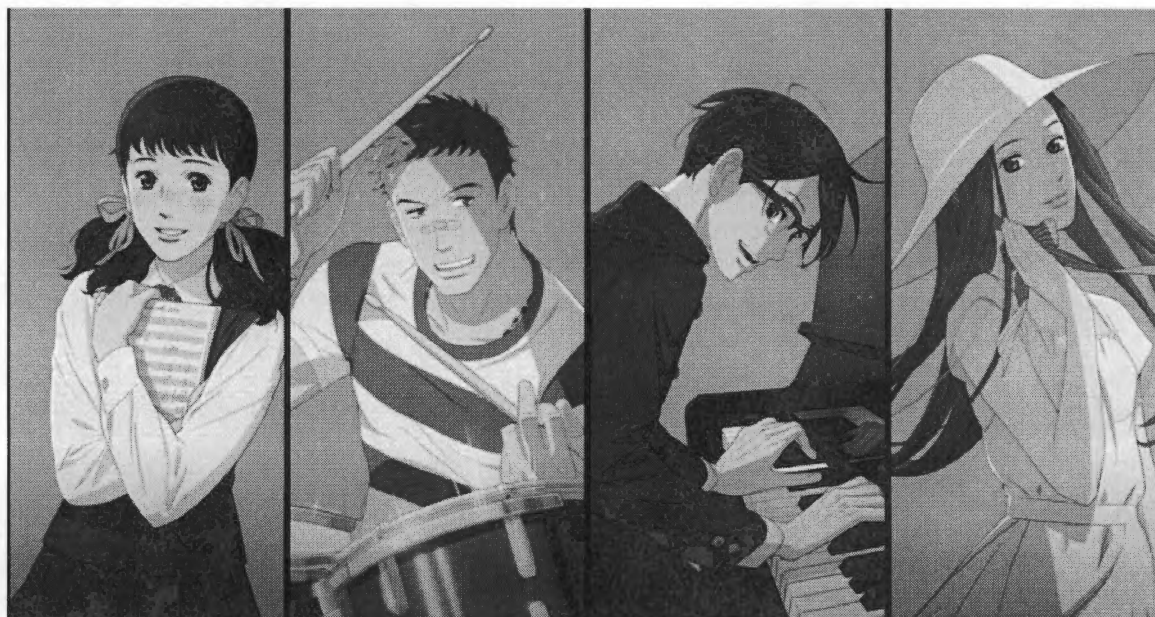


While perhaps not as strong as *Bebop*, *Chinploo* is deeply rooted in music for its world building. *Bebop*'s soundtrack is completely American, filled with jazz and blues. *Chinploo* is

just as American, although hip-hop and jazz may not be commonly connected by the average person. Still, the two styles have much in common, from their use of improvisation to the origins of the genre ("Differences Between Hip-Hop and Jazz"). In both cases, we see music that is entirely Western and free-spirited, the perfect soundtrack to Watanabe's work. With *Champloo*, however, it is not just the music that adds to the show; it is the entire culture behind hip-hop that creates the experience. "The focus there feels as if it is more on the stereotypes of hip-hop and less of the music and culture itself" (Dent). Instead of merely having feudal Japan where the citizens sing hip-hop, the entire world has been given a hip-hop flavor on top of this historic Japanese setting. It is a combination of the two cultures together, one medieval and one modern. The two, while quite different, rarely clash, due to Watanabe's direction.

In 2012, after being involved in a variety of films and television shows, a Watanabe-directed series premiered. *Kids on the Slope* was the first series he directed that was not an original story, as it was based off a manga (Japanese comic book) written in 2007. While this seems to go against Watanabe's usual style of wanting to be as creative as he wants with a project, it is easy to see why he was interested in the project. *Kids* is the story of three high school students living in 1966. The main character, Nishimi Kaoru, is a recent transfer student, with top-of-his-class grades and a knack for classical piano. Due to his history of transferring schools often, he finds himself bad at making connections and is usually a loner; but on the first day he meets delinquent Kawabuchi Sentarō, a half-American whose only love is jazz. With his help, Nishimi breaks out of his shell, finds friends and love, and discovers jazz as both as music and a way of living.

The most obvious theme here is music, which has returned as a stronger core theme in the series than either *Bebop* or *Chomploo*. The jazz is almost as important as anything else in the series, as it is the medium that connects almost every character together. It is what first draws Nishimi to Kawabuchi and his group, and it forces him to open himself up to the world. Unlike the previous two series, these connections are quickly made, yet are tested time and time again; but each time they begin to drift apart, it is their love of music that brings them back together. Every episode has at least one scene of the cast playing together, and these sessions feel like more honest than any conversations: the viewer senses the emotions they are finally letting out to one another, and how the common bond of playing the jazz in unison heals the rift between them. It shows the universality of the music, and how it can express feelings words cannot; this is perhaps Watanabe at his most clear so far about his feelings. Music gave birth this creativity inside him, and this art is how he shows his inspiration.



The largest difference between this and his previous series is the structure of the show. Whereas the last two were both 25 episode shows with most of the shows being small one-shot adventures, with a dramatic overlying plot, *Kids* is written by a different author, so is much different. It is a 12 episode series slice of life, with each episode progressing time to show the years that pass in these student's lives. "Slice of life" has become a popular genre in anime, but a very different one than viewers are used to from this director. The usual pattern from a slice of life is a progressing story, but little actual plot; the story instead revolves around the interactions and character growth of the people in the series. Watanabe's usual style has focused on interpersonal interactions and the overall plot line, but with little true character growth until the end of the series. While almost never used before by Watanabe, montage shots are used frequently in *Kids*, just due to the amount of time that the series covers. This dynamically different style, which he pulls off quite well, shows his flow and range as a director.

In 2014, *Space Dandy*, a project Watanabe hinted at for years released. This project was the recipient of a good deal of hype from the fan base for two reasons: the last time he did a story set in space was *Bebop* (still his most famous work), and that it would be one of the first animes to be "simul-cast," meaning that it would be released in Japan and America simultaneously. The decades of having to wait for shows to be brought to America ended with the coming of high-speed internet, but this was one of the biggest pushes seen before by the Japanese companies to include the Americans as quickly as possible.

Space Dandy summarizes its plot at the beginning of each episode, and no one could attempt to phrase it better: "Space Dandy. He's a dandy guy...in space. He combs the galaxy like his pompadour, on the hunt for aliens. Planet after planet he searches, discovering new

creatures both friendly and not. These are the spectacular adventures of Space Dandy and his brave space crew...in space."

Dandy is different than Watanabe's other anime for several reasons. The first is the use of music in the series. While in all other series music has either been a key point to the plot or as a way of defining the world, but in *Dandy* it plays the more normal role of just being in the background. Granted, Dandy's character could be seen as being inspired by the disco movement with his exaggerated movements, sense of style and personality; but for the most part, music only is there to add to the mood of a scene like in most media. Another key difference is that he is not the sole director on the project. While this is not abnormal in animation (where there is other an overall director or two with several episode directors for specific parts of a season), Watanabe has often been an auteur that wears many hats, working on storyboard, script, episode directing, as well as being the final word on any project as the only full director. With this project, however, he stated in an interview that he wanted a chance to work with other creators in Japan, and that they should not be tied down or limited in their creativity (Watanabe, "Cowboy Bebop & Space Dandy Interview - Shinichiro Watanabe"). This is a drastic change of how he works as an artist, and it shows in the work as being of more than just one mind; yet, at the same time, we see multiple examples of how his original style has been exaggerated.

A huge similarity is the structure of the series, with the show being 26 episodes of self-contained stories. But unlike the other series, every episode is stand-alone, with there not being any correlation between one another, aside from the occasional reference brought up by

the characters (the finale explains it all as parallel dimensions) and a consistent antagonist that is almost never actually brought up except as another returning gag. While he is often used episodes to tell short stories, he is always connected his overall plot at the end. With *Dandy*, there is no plot; all there is to the show as a whole is these short vignettes, many of which actually having the main characters die, then resetting the next episode with little more than a 4th wall breaking joke about it. Being put into perspective, it is almost a hyper-stylized form of his usual style. It is a show based around exaggerated characters, with an exaggerated setting, based around the exaggerated style of Watanabe.



Watanabe has always had humor in his shows, but he has never done a full comedy before this. As it may be obvious to most, the series does not take itself seriously, most of the series' humor coming from parody and satire. Watanabe's style of humor as always relied on the wacky qualities of his characters and *Dandy* follows in the footsteps of those before it;

Dandy, the smooth-talking womanizer with no luck, Meow, the cat-like alien pervert, and QT, the last-generation robot, all play off of each other in every episode for sheer hysterics. The show uses many less references than his previous works; but the show as a whole is just as inspired as *Bebop* ever was. Watanabe stated that he was fascinated in his past with Science Fiction novels and films (Watanabe, "Shinichiro Watanabe Interview - Cowboy Bebop, Kids On The Slope & New Series"), and this show makes full use of the norms and trends of that genre. Many of the classic tropes of Sci Fi have been taken to insane new forms, such as a laser gun becoming an electrically-charged fishing rod for capturing aliens, a spaceship steered by motorcycle handlebars with a dancing hula girl on the dashboard, and the universe populated by hundreds of different aliens, all with original designs. One episode is all about two armies (each composing of a single alien) fighting a huge war to decide if underpants or vests is the superior clothing.

Satire also plays a huge role, but the real target of it is not the Sci Fi elements, but anime as a whole. Dandy is overly macho, competing with the recent trend of manly men protagonists in anime. To counter the rise of more perverse content, Dandy also frequents a chain of "breastaurants" called "Boobies," where every waitress is of the appropriate proportions to work at such an establishment. Every action scene is also just a hyperbole of other series, with one having the spaceship transform into a giant robot, complete with a pompadour as fine as Dandy's, to win a race. Strangely enough, of all the shows he has done, this has the least amount of direct ties to Western media. Granted, the show as a whole has an unmistakable Western feeling to it, from the action to the characters themselves, but there are fewer direct references than we are use to from him. The most obvious one, however, is by far

one of his best; the spaceship used by the antagonists is the head of the Statue of Liberty, complete with a ball-gag in her mouth. There is really no overall message he is trying to say, he seems to have merely done this to get a reaction from his American fans. While so much of the series is new ground for the director, at its core the show is 100% Watanabe.

Ikuhara Kunihiro-Anime's Art House Auteur

Moving in a different direction of anime is Ikuhara Kunihiro. Born December 21, 1964, he began working for Toei Animation (Toei Doga, the studio behind *Astro Boy*) in 1983 ("Ikuhara, Kunihiro"). He worked on few projects before becoming an episode director for a large amount of the show *Sailor Moon S*. He soon after left the studio to form his own group, Be-Papas, so that he could fully express himself through his work. His first work after the studio's founding, *Revolutionary Girl Utena*, is still one of the most feminist-empowering anime today, but the odd nature of the series made getting sponsorship difficult. It took almost a decade before his next series *Mawaru Penguindrum* (2011) could be released. His work, while not the most marketable or financially successful are critically acclaimed, with *Utena*, receiving the "Best Television Series Award" at the Kobe Animation Awards (an equivalent to the Emmys for Japanese Animation). Ikuhara has been known to be a cryptic director, enjoying the fact that he can confuse his viewers with his surrealist style without being forced to give them answers when directly asked questions. He is also quite popular among fans, being seen cosplaying (dressing in costume) of female characters of his series. If nothing else, he is an eccentric man who loves to put symbolic meaning behind everything in his work. He has stated that he admires Stanley Kubrick and David Lynch, and that he would like to work with Lynch if he ever got the chance (Ikuhara).

While Watanabe's work was heavily inspired by, and reads as Western, Ikuhara's comes across as Japanese in both appearance and in his writing. "Both the Buddhist and Confucian teachings emphasize the existence of an ultimate life or truth associated with the 'world'... However, it cannot be well-defined and is something that we feel" (Sheedy). Like many

surrealist directors, Ikuhara lets his work be open to multiple interpretations for the viewers to decide on personally, another reason for his misguiding, evasive answers when asked about his work. We also see more Eastern ideals in that group mentality is important to the characters. Where Westerners generally have a more individual-oriented mindset, "The Eastern Mind, on the other hand, defines success in terms of attaining harmony and enlightenment. Harmony and enlightenment are attained by approaching or attaining the truth about life" (Sheedy). *Mawaru Penguindrum*, we have one of the brothers leave the family; this is treated in the series as the gravest mistake he makes, eclipsing the other faults he has throughout.

Much of his work is directly inspired by the first project he worked on, *Sailor Moon S* (1994-1995), a "magical girl" anime where young teenage women are gifted with powers to use for good. In terms of anime, it is one of the oldest genres, and one of the most iconic; it is also one of a handful of genres that is predominately created for a younger female audience. With this audience in mind, the genre is generally more feminist than many of its anime peers. Japan, for all of the improvements that have occurred in the last century, remains socially conservative and is still struggling with gender roles and expectations in its culture. Ikuhara has a limited pool of work, but an underlying theme in all of his titles is an incredibly progressive view of gender views, gender identity, and sexuality.

One of Ikuhara's most identifiable traits, in all of his work, is the use of repetition in his scenes, especially those with large, grand animation behind them. For example, in his work *Utena*, the first episode shows the lead walking up to a doorway, opening it using her ring, watching it transform into a large archway, then marching up the flight of stairs behind it to the dueling grounds. This is an almost two-minute sequence, and it is repeated several times

throughout the series, every time she duels. For a series which attempts to say so much in so little time, why would the director waste this kind of time on repetition? I believe for two reasons. First, he started in anime working on *Sailor Moon S* (1994-1995), which was known for having a scene depicting the lead characters transforming anytime they wished to use their powers; this has gone on in history and is commonly made the butt of jokes inside the fandom. But for Ikuhara, it made a lasting impact. By using the repetition of these scenes, it adds power and importance to them. It allows the audience to know how vital this scene, this moment, is to the story and the symbolic meaning behind it. In *Sailor Moon*, this transformation shows that this was no longer the weak-willed high school girl from before, but a confident, determined woman ready to do what she must.

Secondly, to save on the budget. *Revolutionary Girl Utena*, his premiere work as a series director, was created on a budget of ¥120,000,000, which translates today to be about \$20 million. Anime have a history of being under budgeted, leading to sometimes painful quality drops in production. The most famous example is *Neon Genesis Evangelion* (1995-1996), which is perhaps the most famous anime in the world. The series was underfinanced to the point that the last episode of the show is almost entirely still images and the storyboard frames, which appeared to have been colored in by hand with markers. Director of the show Hideaki Anno is actually a close friend of Ikuhara's, so this incident would have been fresh in the new director's mind as he worked on his first series.

Another common technique used in his work is the repetition of a single image or object. Much like a novel will continually return to an object as a symbolic representation of a character or element in the story, Ikuhara continuously show this image to drive his metaphor

home to the viewers. This is not something often found in anime nearly as much as it is in other media, so it makes his work stand out further than it already does.

A final aesthetic found in every Ikuhara work is a certain level of sexuality. Before continuing with this essay, an important point must be analyzed. Many contemporary anime are highly sexual; whether it is the plot, the design of characters, or the choice of shots, much of today's anime is purposely made titillating. Over the years, as anime became more and more of a niche audience, producers and artists realized who most of their viewers are. In a poll taken of 1000 people on the social site Reddit, 92% of those that responded were male, and out of the 54% that posted their age, 48% of that were between the ages of 16 and 25 (*Results from /r/anime Demographic Survey*). With these figures, it is understandable from a business perspective why much of the anime today is targeted at a younger male audience. As a direct result, the fandom has come to see more series based around males surrounded by beautiful women, women's designs to have larger breasts and show more skin, and to feature shots that hyper-accentuate the sexual nature of the characters (the best example being the infamous "panty-shot," an up-skirt shot of the woman's more intimate area). These usually end up seeming like a ploy to draw in a larger viewer base, and generally feel either out-of-place in the series, or they become the only draw to the series. While the degree of this objectification varies from series to series, as well as director to director, a majority of anime released in the last decade shows some degree of this, though whether it is intentional or has unknowingly become a movement throughout the market is uncertain. Among the three, however, the manipulation of shots is the worst offender, because it is impossible for it to have been unintentional. Every animator working on the shot, which is many considering most anime run

between 15-24 frames per second (Sanders), had to specifically animate the scene either looking up or down on a girl to be revealing. The problem is not just with the thoughtless sexual nature, but also how disturbing it feels looking at it critically; it comes off as nothing more than voyeuristic.

With this in mind, Ikuhara is, by definition, a sexual director. But at no point do any of Ikuhara's choices as a director appear tasteless or exploitative; his decisions as a director always seem to be artistic, never economic. All three of his original works have a sexual nature to them, whether it be a motivation of a character, or simply a view into sexuality as a social construct; but he is sexual in the way that these series see sex as something that occurs in life and should be discussed while trying to show the lives of people. His representation and design of his female characters, especially younger women, are some of the least misogynistic in the current market. His females may be cute or even beautiful, but they are never made blatantly sexual. As for the last, and perhaps worst, on the list, he even goes out of his way in his second series to point out the perverse nature of this. In the series, we have characters that are invisible and unnoticeable to everyone except our protagonists. During this time, one of these unseen characters uses his powers for mischief, mainly for the purpose of (like many contemporary anime characters) peeping up women's skirts. The chief difference here is that at no point is this taboo region ever actually seen by the viewers; instead it is left covered by either the peeping tom himself, or is hidden by the angle of the camera shot. Not only does this give us the comedic element of the gag without ruining it with unnecessary fan service, it also demonstrates further the level of respect that Ikuhara feels for his characters. They are not there to be taken advantage of by the male gaze of his audience; they are his precious cast that

he has given birth to, almost like his children. And like any good father, he does not abuse them for profit.

Revolutionary Girl Utena was his first true work, and still one of the most iconic anime of the late 90s. The story centers on Tenjou Utena, a young girl who was comforted by a prince as a young girl. This inspires her to become a prince herself, going so far as to walk the campus of her school in a male uniform. One day, to defend the honor of a friend, she engages in a dual with a member of the student council, and after winning finds herself engaged to Himemiya Anthy, the "Rose Bride." Utena must now battle the other members of the Student Council, and any others challengers, to protect Anthy and gain the power to "bring the world revolution."

As mentioned before, Ikuhara was a director that used heavy symbolism in his work, and repeated that symbolism as often as he could throughout his different series. In *Utena*, the most commonly used symbol was the rose. Between the Rose Bride, the rose -crested rings given to dualists, and the Black Rose Organization that invades the series during its second story arc, roses play a pivotal role in the plot of the show. But the use goes further than this. At many times throughout the series, the show will place a border around the screen, with roses at each corner, the color of which depending on the character framed. The rose itself has several metaphors behind it. It stands for beauty, for nobility, and for love. But most of all the blooming rose stands for the blooming sexual of the characters. The flower has for centuries been a metaphor for a young girl passing into womanhood, and this particular rose is especially symbolic of Utena. As she is tested and her relationship with those around her changes, she slowly transforms herself from a foolish girl into a determined, wiser adult; she, like the flower, quite literally blooms before our eyes.



One of the most original concepts in *Utena* is the returning appearance of the women, who appear in every episode from behind a screen. With every new episode comes a different humorous skit that, often vaguely, ties into the events of the episode. Visually, they are an obvious throwback to shadow puppetry, an ancient form of theatre from various parts of Asia; by appearing as only silhouettes, they look just like the puppets used for these types of shows. They themselves use puppets and props to give depth to the skits that they perform.

Their true function, however, is a bit more Western: the role of the chorus. In the plays of ancient Greece a chorus was used, a group of actors whose only role was to summarize action to the audience and give them information they would need (Gill). In some cases, such as *Oedipus Rex*, we would see them interact with characters on stage; but for the most part, they were only observers, only coming out and giving their lines to break up actions happening on stage. These two silhouetted women play a similar role in *Utena*. They are never characters seen throughout the rest of the show, and they generally appear directly before the climax of each episode. They seem to be some of the few characters that are not desperately looking for

new information, just willing to give it out in their own, cryptic way. For the first arc of the show, they showed their knowledge by ending every encounter with "Do you know? Do you really know?" almost if to taught the viewer with how little they understood. In the second arc, however, Utena begins interacting with them, in a similar way at times to Oedipus. In this way, Utena is shown to have come more to terms with her destiny; she has accepted her role and begins taking an active part in it.

In terms of themes, the most obvious and important one is that of gender roles. The series begins by telling her backstory of her meeting the prince and aspiring to become a prince just like him; it is obvious that she is not following the standard expectations of a lady. "She is a young woman who seems to embody the best of traditional 'masculine' characteristics, such as perseverance and loyalty, combined with the idealized feminine traits of nurturance and sensitivity (traits echoed and intensified in Anthy)" (Napier, Pg. 173). She is berated in the beginning by teachers and peers for dressing like a man, but this trait almost never changes. It is only a few times in the series where we see her wear a dress, and it is usually only for a few minutes before she replaces it with her normal garb. Unlike the stereotypical girl in a fairy tale, she is the one that does all the fighting, constantly battling other dualists and winning, even when against male opponents. At the end of the series, when she finally meets her prince, she is dressed by him in a beautiful dress (mirroring the one worn by Anthy during the duals); he then takes her sword away, stating that she will not need it, as he will protect her now. Utena, realizing what is happening to her and to Anthy, rejects this position, and once more takes up the mantle as the prince so that she can attempt to save Anthy from her fate as the Rose Bride.

Anthy, on the other hand, is the epitome of the feminine stereotype. Where Utena is assertive, Anthy is passive. Where the dualist takes up the sword, the Bride watches each dual without comment or emotion. Whenever she switches sides, she does so without protest; whoever is her current keeper is the one that she gives total support for, doing whatever she says, almost like a talking doll. She is the most objectified character in the series in the way that she is literally treated by most of the dualists as an object. Whoever controls the Rose Bride is said to have the power to bring the world revolution, a power that all but Utena desire at one point or another. Even Utena falls into this trap eventually, as she begins to see Anthy as less of a friend and more of a thing that she must protect to prove her progress as a prince.

Another key theme to the show is sexuality. Throughout the show, we see the relationship between Utena and Anthy become closer and closer, going from acquaintances to friends to possible romantic partners. Utena herself shows a level of sexual flexibility or bisexuality that is rarely seen in television, and almost never as tastefully. We also see other examples of homosexuality throughout the series, such as another one of the dualists that hides her feelings for a childhood friend. More than this, however, we see the dark side of sexuality. Incest is a critical point throughout the series, with Anthy having a relation with her brother Akio, the series' antagonist. We also see Akio use sex to manipulate those around him, including the dualists and Utena herself. "For those involved in this sexual activity (which is never depicted graphically), the act seems to bring only guilt and shame rather than pleasure (Napier, Pg. 174). Ikuhara makes sure that the audience is aware of both sides of sexuality, how it can be a beautiful, comforting aspect in one's life, or a weapon someone can use against another.

A final important theme of the show is repressed emotions. The entire second arc of the story, known as the Black Rose saga, is about the antagonist Mikage Souji, obsessed with the past and determined to relive it using the Rose Bride's power. By tempting those around him with what they crave most, he uses them against Utena to try and kill the Rose Bride. The metaphor used for these sections is clever. As they ride down into the pits of his lair, they reveal their hidden feelings; as they go deeper inwards and closer to the truth, a butterfly on the wall slowly turns back into a cocoon, then a caterpillar, then finally a leaf as they finally realize what they actually want. They then use these repressed feelings as weapons, literally drawing swords out of the hearts of their beloved to dual with. The rose rings that they wear, signifying their place as a dualist, as taken from the corpses of dualists killed long ago by Mikage; everything about these fights is taken from something dead or buried. While releasing these pent-up emotions allows them to finally be honest with themselves and others, the way they use their new-found feelings is nothing but destructive and painful, especially to the one they feel for, who fall unconscious after having the sword pulled from their hearts.

After *Utena*, Ikuhara went many years without directing another television series, due to the unorthodox nature of his work. When he did finally create another work, it was in the form of *Mawaru Penguindrum*. The story follows two twin brothers, Kanba and Shoma, whose sister Himari dies from a fatal disease, only to be brought back to live by an entity that resides in a penguin hat. The entity tells them the only way to keep Himari alive is to find and give her the "penguindrum." Their hunt leads them to Ringo, a girl with the diary of her dead sister that tells the future; Watase Sanetoshi a secretive doctor whose motivations are unknown; and an organization somehow connected to their dead parents. Like *Utena*, the series has strong

fantasy elements and is high drama with comedy splashed in at times to prevent it from being emotionally dragging. It also shares many of the same traits.

Like the previous show, *Penguindrum* has symbolism that it keeps going back on. In this case, the main one is an apple. Apples have just as many symbolic meanings as the rose: life, knowledge, sin, cultural advancement, forbidden acts, sexuality. Most of these meanings are from the story of Adam and Eve, but they also have a place in most fairy tales, for which Ikuhara has an obvious passion. In the case of this series, it generally stands for life or forbidden knowledge. At the halfway point in the show, Himari's condition worsens and she dies again, but Watase manages to bring her back using a medicine that he transforms from an apple; Watase, as we learn later, is our main antagonist, and the apple shows him using ill-gained knowledge to bring her back. To the family, however, this act symbolizes life, as it does for the rest of the series. Near the end, during a flashback showing the two boys struggling for life as children, Shoma finds an apple as they near starvation; Kanba claims that he had been chosen by destiny and should eat it without guilt. Shoma then breaks it in half and, as the phrase is repeated throughout the series, "share the fruit of fate." In the finale scene, as Kanba begins bleeding out, the blood (instead of showing it spray out of his chest) appears as apples floating out of him. Ikuhara planned a good part of the series around this one symbol. Ringo is one of the most important characters in the show; "ringo" is the Japanese for "apple." Ringo also happens to be the only person in the show with the forbidden knowledge of how to change fates. On top of this, the Chinese word for apple is "Píngguǒ," which sounds too similar to "penguin" to be coincidence. Penguins, aside from being a motif throughout the show, are also the symbol of the secret organization, which happens to be run by Watase; these people are

responsible for most of the foul deeds throughout the series, and the apple there might be referring more to death in their case than life, like the poisoned apple from *Snow White*.



Another visual we see repeated is train stations and subways. Subways are actually a common motif in anime due to the impact of them on the life of those living in dense cities, but *Penguindrum* takes it to a new level. With every transition to a setting in a different part of the town, we see the terminal signs showing the new location. This repetition ties in most heavily to the main theme of the show: destiny. Destiny is a path one must go down, with stops along the way, and junctions where one can attempt to change the final location. The finale of the series is even placed on the “train of fate,” where the different destinies of multiple characters have converged together.

But destiny and fate are how the show begins, with Shoma giving his view on fate:

"I hate the word 'fate.' Birth, encounters, partings, success and failures, fortune and misfortunes in life. If our lives are already set in stone by fate, then why are we even born? There are those born to wealthy families, those born to beautiful mothers, and those born into the middle of war or poverty. If that's all caused by fate, then God is incredibly unfair and cruel. Because, ever since that day, none of us had a future and the only certain thing was that we wouldn't amount to anything."

Ringo, on the other hand, gives us a more positive outlook on fate. Her main possession in the series is her dead sister's diary, which had the events of her future planned in it. Ringo uses this as a way to try and cope with the death and her parents' coming divorce as a child, thinking that by using the diary to make the destiny in it come true, she can become her sister to keep the family together. Fate, to her, is a role that she has gladly accepted, stating in her introduction:

"I love the word 'fate.' Because, you know how they talk about 'fated encounters?' A single encounter can completely change your life. Such special encounters are not just coincidences. They're definitely... fate. Of course, life is not all happy encounters. There are many painful, sad, moments. It's hard to accept that misfortunes beyond your control are fate. But this is what I think: sad and painful things definitely happen for a reason. Nothing in this world is pointless."

In both cases, we have two outlooks on the same subject, and at no point does Ikuhara try and say that one view is superior to the other; that would not be the style of this director. Instead, destiny is portrayed more as a path (using the train metaphor). There are multiple

routes you can take, with twisting junctions and intersections where your fate may run into another. But in the end, there will always be a final destination while riding the train of fate.

The other theme we see, and this is one repeated from *Utena*, is having the past come back to haunt you in the present. Similar to the role of Mikage, Watase is a phantom come back to haunt the present after failing his goal years before. He, along with the parents of Kanba and Shoma, launched a terrorist attack that killed Ringo's sister. The burden of the past is one of the factors that most haunts the twins; if their parents were responsible for so many deaths, and were never found to accept punishment, than are they as the children responsible for taking the burden of their crimes? Ringo, with her quest to take the fate of her sister, finds at the end of the series a spell left to her, a spell to change fates with someone else, which the twins then use to sacrifice themselves to save Himari. In this way, while destiny is a path one walks down, one's fate and the memories of the past are the burden that they carry down that path.

Contrasting Styles of the Industry's Best

As it is quite obvious to see, Watanabe and Ikuhara are on opposite spectrums as directors. There are two main differences between the two. The first is the inspiration and the mentality of the work. Watanabe is inspired by Western media and has characters with Western ideals and mindsets. Ikuhara was inspired by Western directors, but has work that is fundamentally Eastern in theme, mindset, and character. From Watanabe, the industry has received anime unlike anything previously seen; a blast of Western influence and music that many new directors fail at trying to imitate. His greatest influence on anime was showing the strength of a series that can blend various styles and cultures together. Ikuhara showed many viewers that anime, often a misogynistic industry, can be incredibly progressive, focusing on tackling issues such as sexuality and gender roles over aesthetics. The other difference is that Watanabe is a mainstream director while Ikuhara is a more surrealist, art house style director. This is not being used as a strike against Watanabe; like Tarantino, he has found a way to completely express his artistic talent in a way that appeals to a mainstream audience through its action and easily-accessible plot. Ikuhara, on the other hand, represents much of the art house genre; his work is heavily symbolic, his plots are often times more complex and take more time to understand, while his high points of action are more mental/emotional instead of physical (even the duels in *Utena* were more about the clashing of ideology than swords). Watanabe, at the heart of his work, is flashy, noir, Hip-hop, and modern. Ikuhara can be summed up as a man crafting a fairy tale, but one where the princess does the rescuing.

Ikuhara and Watanabe, while obviously showing major differences in ideology and technique, are both two of the outliers in today's animation. This, therefore, makes them

perfect to study for a grasp on what the medium has to say to its audience; the two directors together showcase the best examples of what has come to influence and shape much of today's high-end televised animation from Japan. Even in America, effects of their work can be seen. *Avatar the Last Airbender*, the Nickelodeon series that took the country by storm during its run, owed most of its world and protagonists to the tropes and stories found in anime. In the newest spin-off, *Legend of Korra* (2012-2014). The show demonstrates lesson learned directly from Watanabe and Ikuhara; the audience is shown a world composed of equal parts Western and Eastern cultures, while having a protagonist with evolving sexual tendencies. In this, and much of American media with ties to Japanese animation, a trend is beginning that showcases elements of both directors. By examining these two radically different directors, and the themes they showcase in their collective works, we as Americans can become more aware of this part of Japanese culture; as well as how the West has influenced this fundamentally Japanese cultural artifact.

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